Vistagraphs

An experiment in scenic photography

by Bernie Sumption

Humans are nothing like cameras. While the human eye itself is somewhat like a camera, the eye is just one part of the human ability to perceive the visual world, and cameras suffer from several limitations that do not affect humans. Vistagraphs are an experiment in producing images that reflect the way that humans perceive the world.

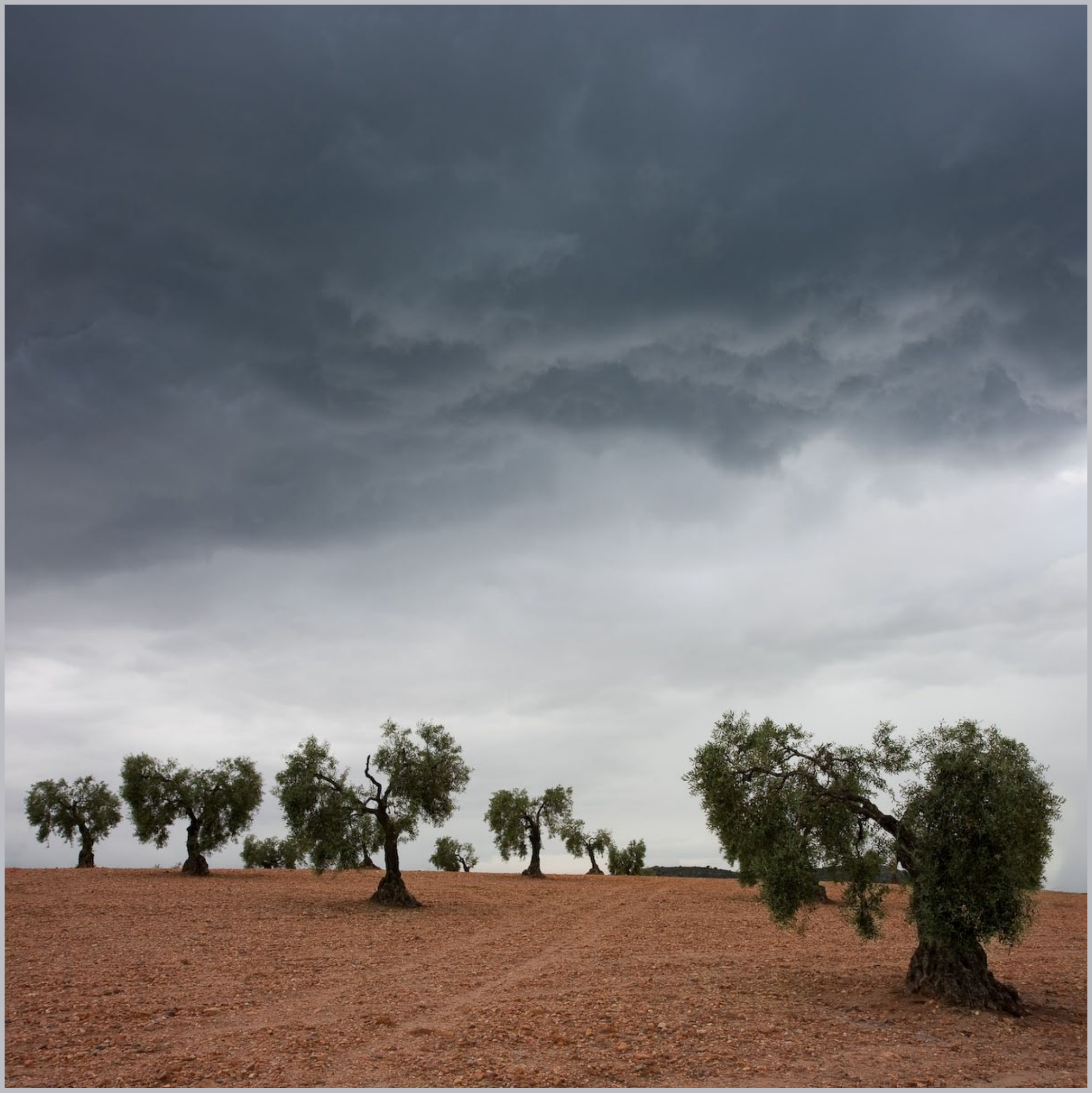
The photos are better appreciated without knowing the technique that was used, so I explain it at the end of this book.

In the spirit of SoFoBoMo, the “worst book contest ever”, I decided to include in this book all 15 vistagraphs I made over a 2 week holiday in Spain over which I experimented with the vistagraph technique. This includes some images I’m very proud of, and some unpolished prototypes that I’d burn in secret if it weren’t for SoFoBoMo. They are presented in the order that they were created.

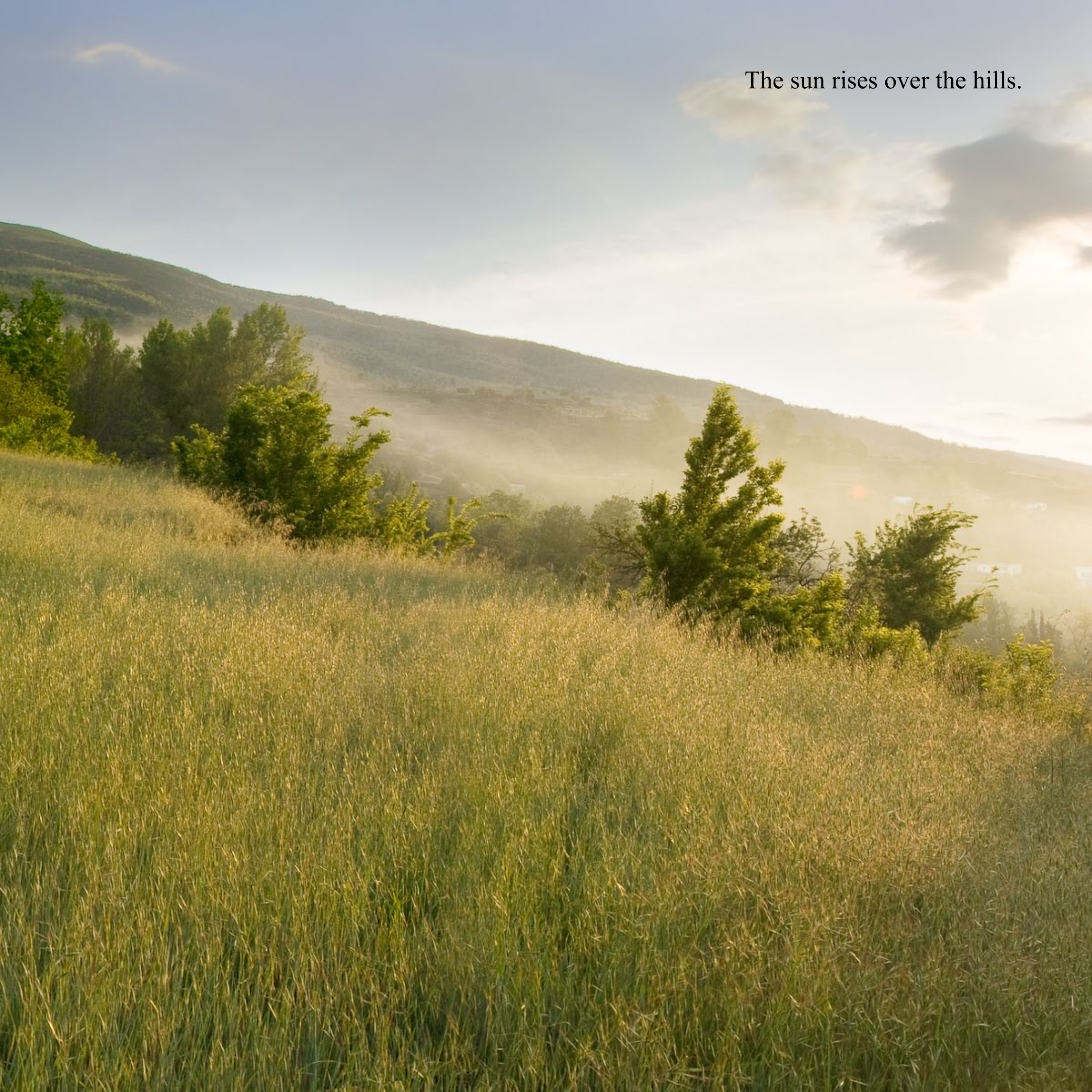
Onwards...

Storm clouds pass over the olive groves, but no rain falls.

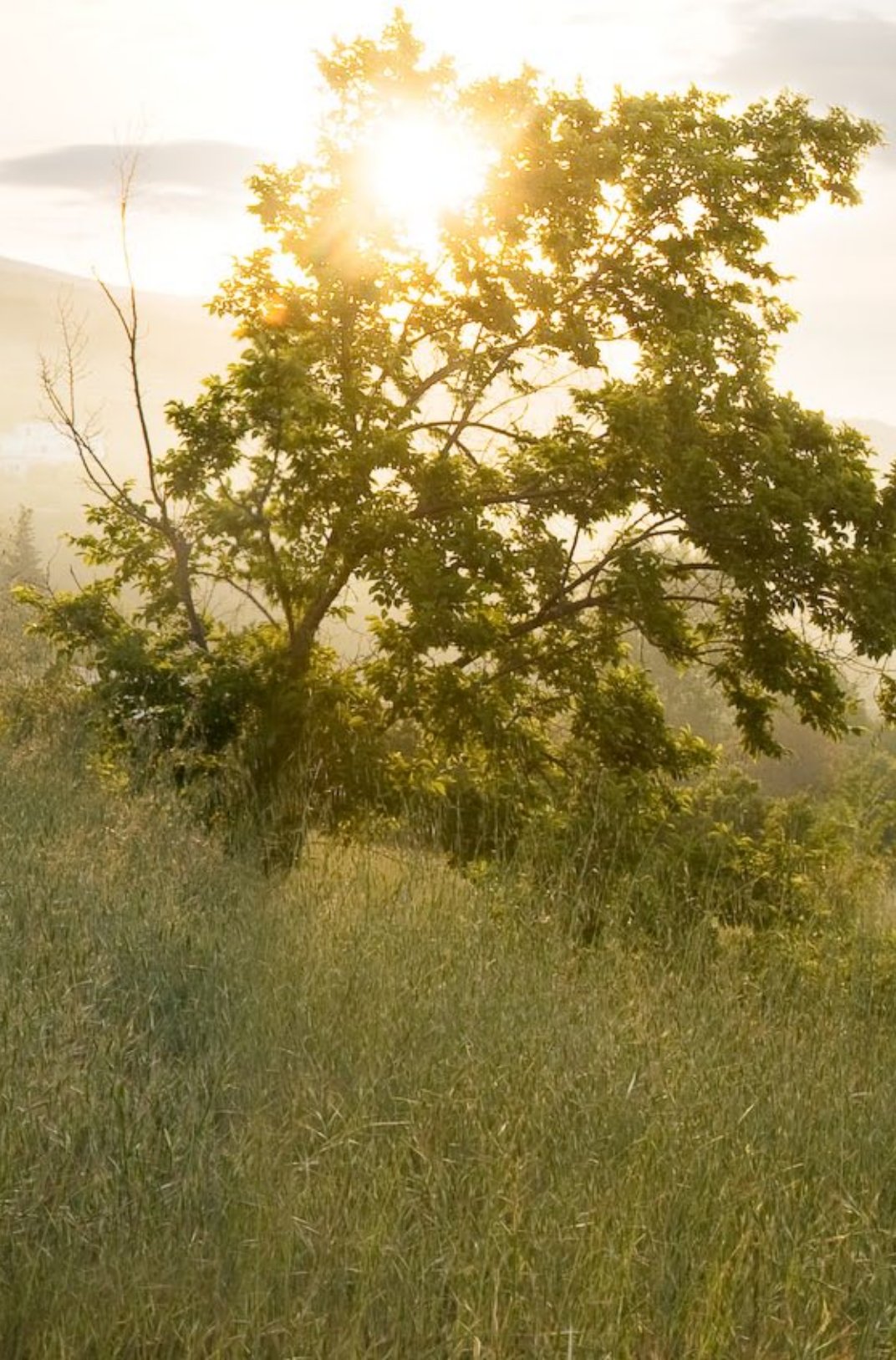
The parched red ground crunches under your feet



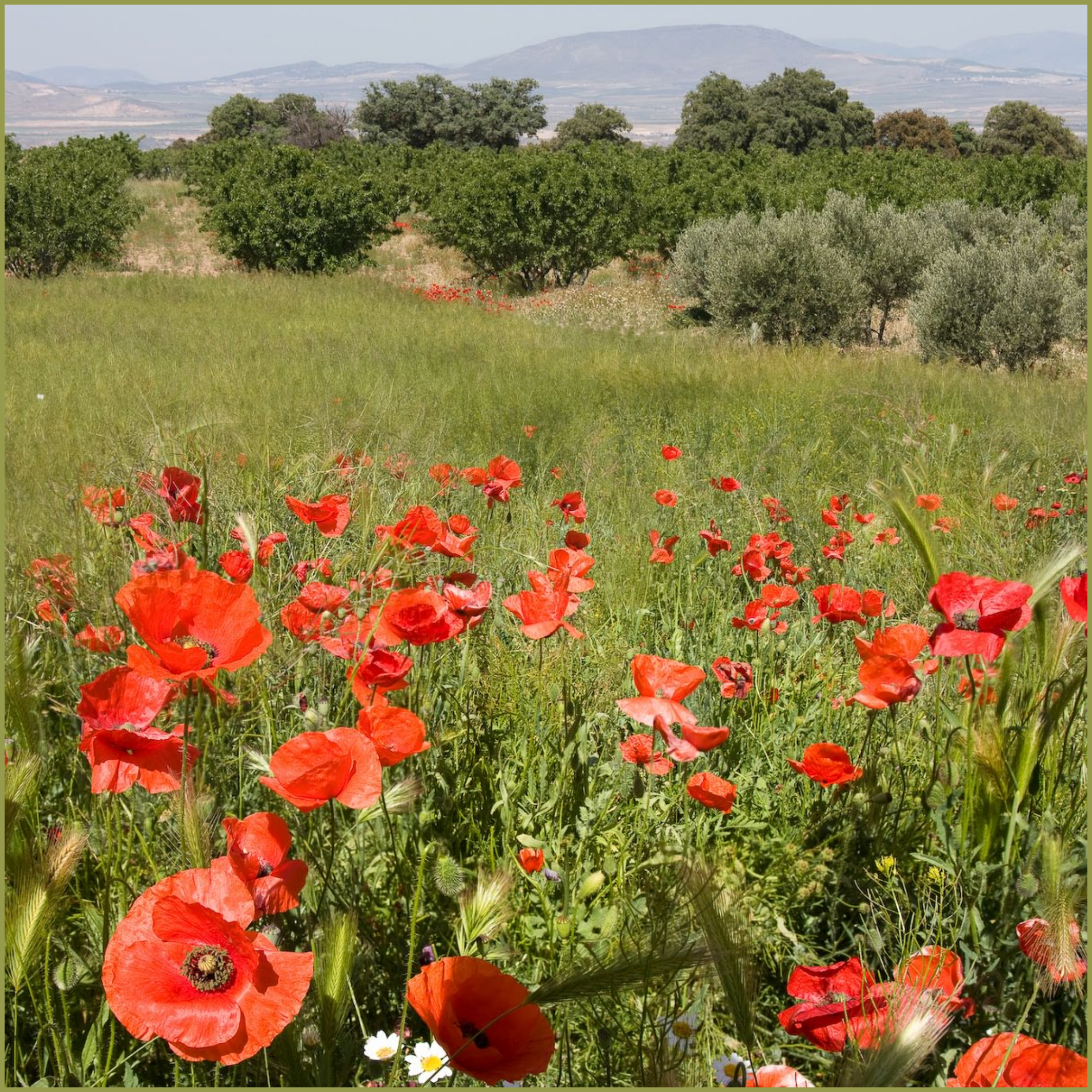
The sun rises over the hills.



Dew clings to long grass, soaking your legs as you walk through the fields.



The air is cold and smells of herbs.



Patches of poppies grow up through crops.

The flowers are fragile and quiver slightly in the wind.

A green mattress invites you to lie down in the afternoon

Daisies brush your neck as you recline into the meadow.

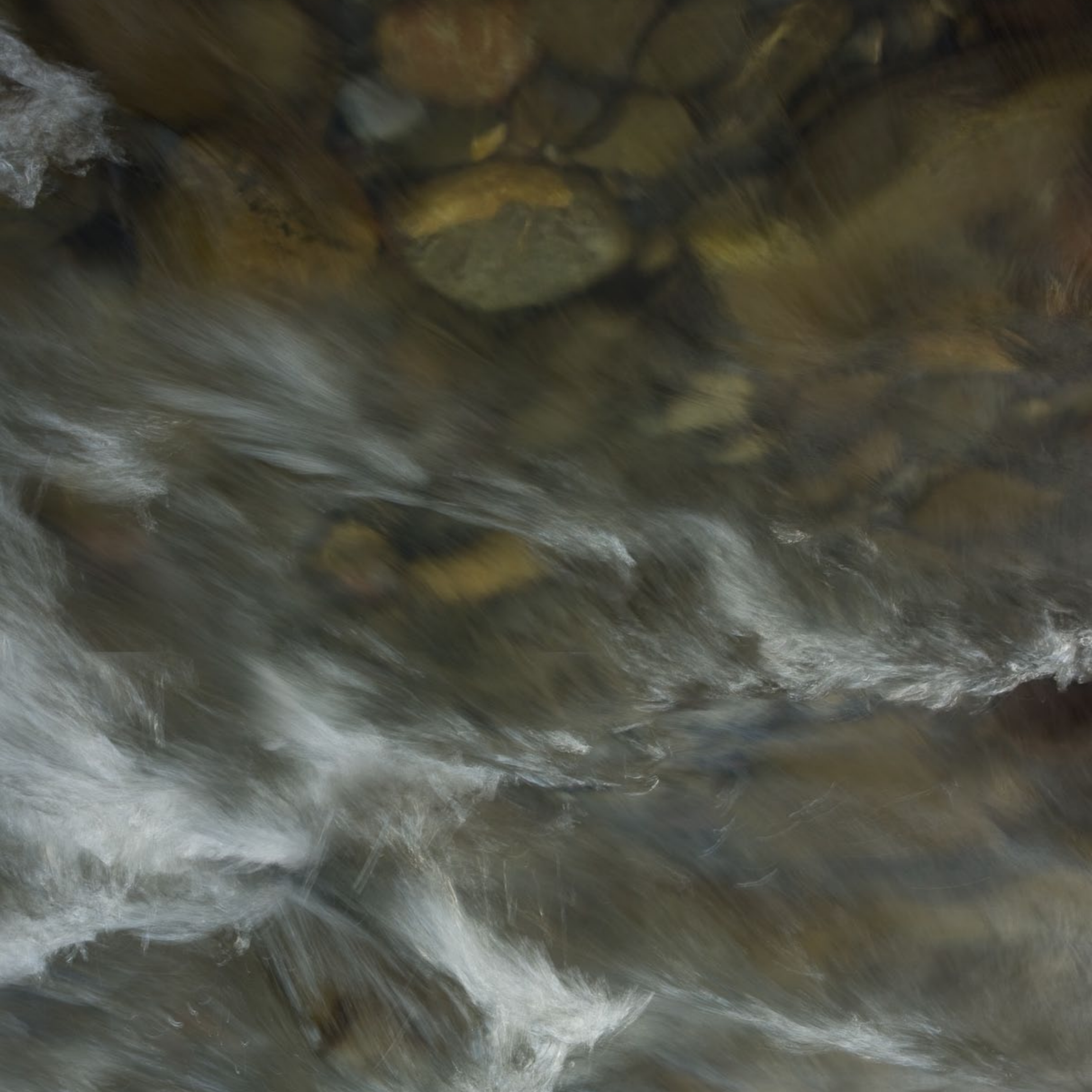
You can hear the wind softly shaking the sheaves of grass by your ear.

Walking over the crest of a hill, a seemingly endless view is exposed all at once

A village is framed by crisscrossing hills that disappear into the blue afternoon haze

Wheat grows in the plains below the mountains

You drag your hand through the ears and wonder how such a spiky plant can ever become a loaf of white bread.



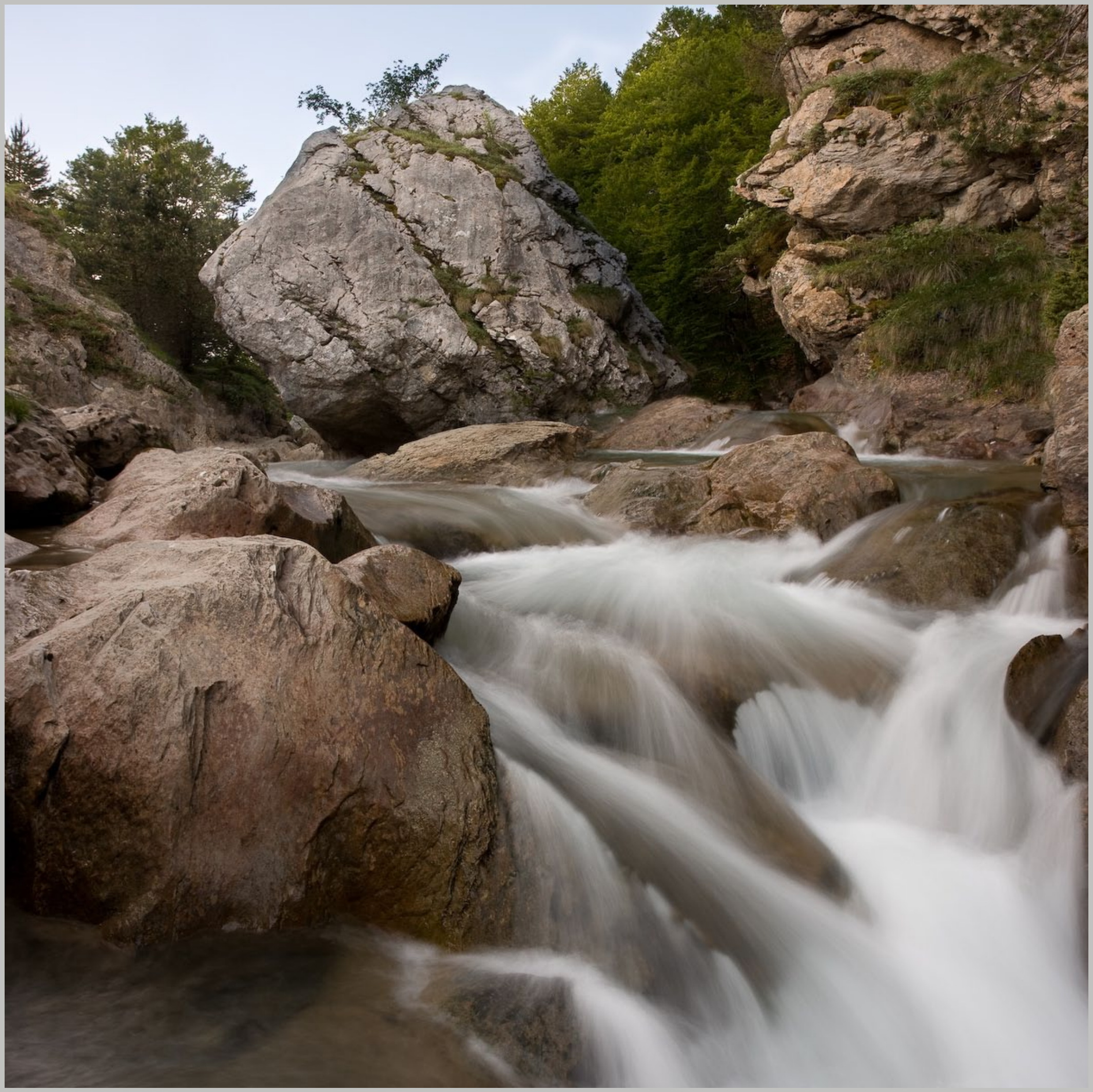
Picking your way barefoot across a wide shallow river, you slip, and steady yourself with your hands on the river bed

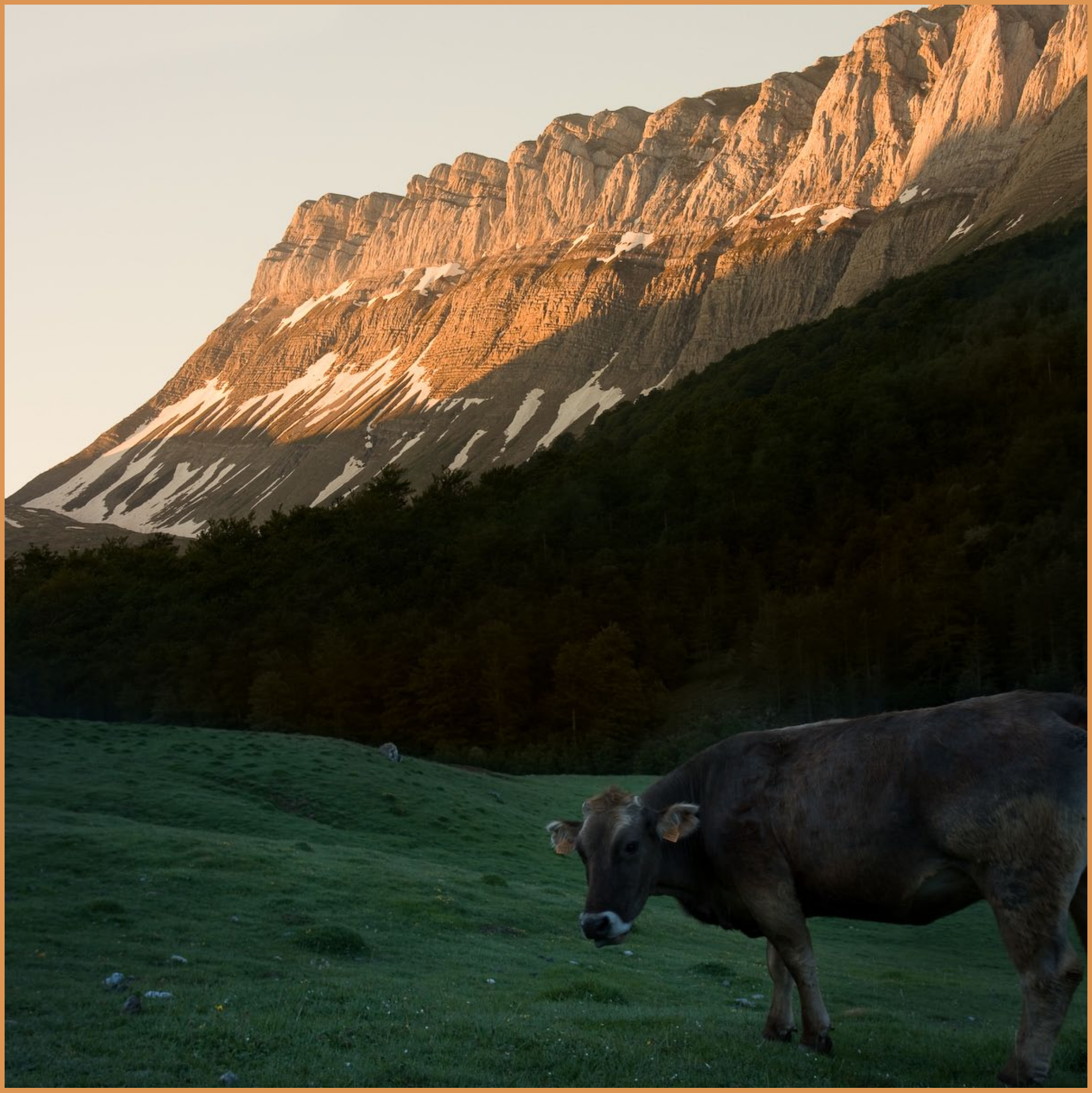
The fresh snow melt courses around your fingertips

Over the years, the wall has sunk into the ground; you step over it with ease

The stone is rough, and warm to the touch

Moving gingerly across wet stones, you steady yourself with your hands and look up





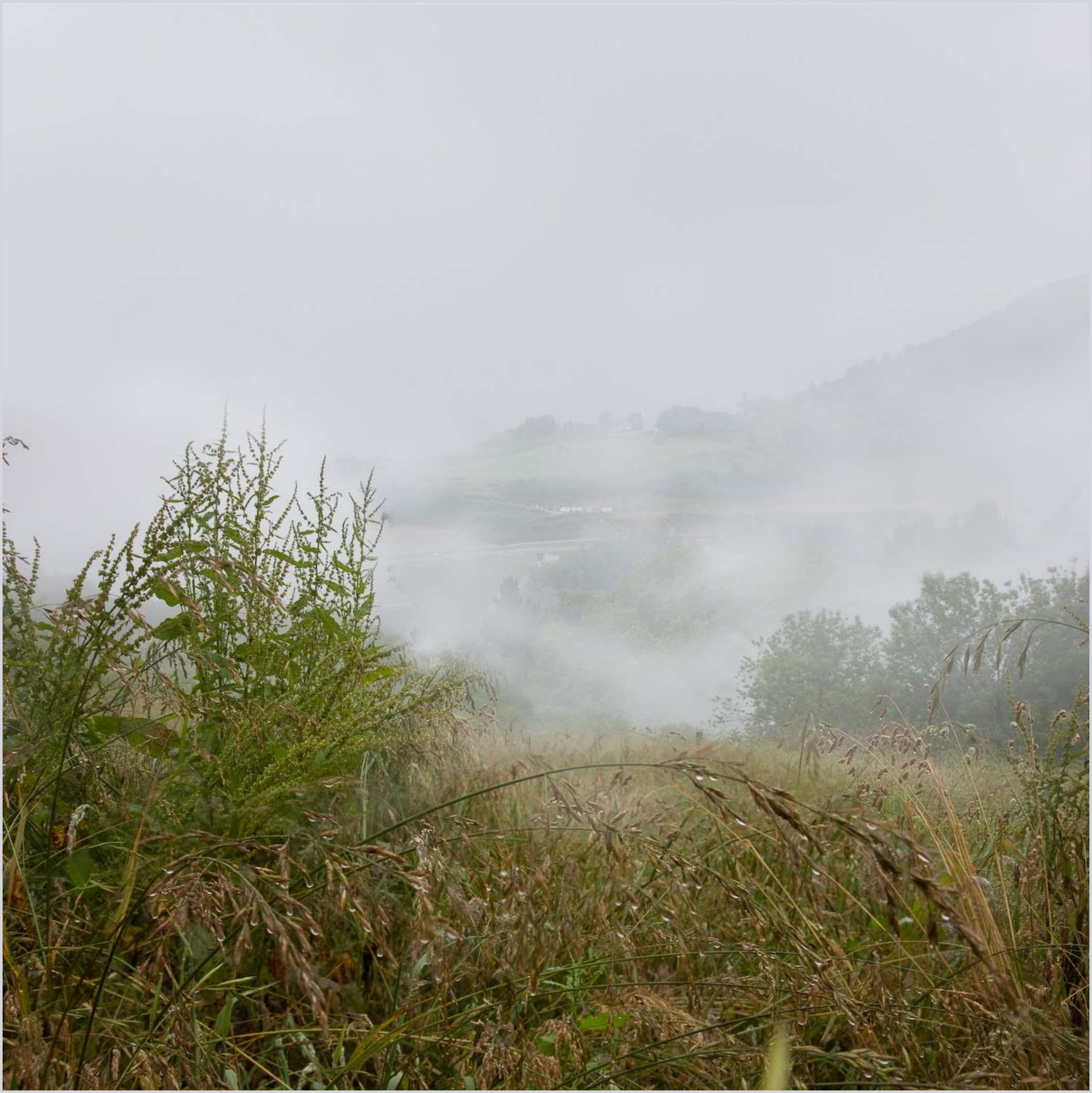
You wait for sunrise in a deep valley

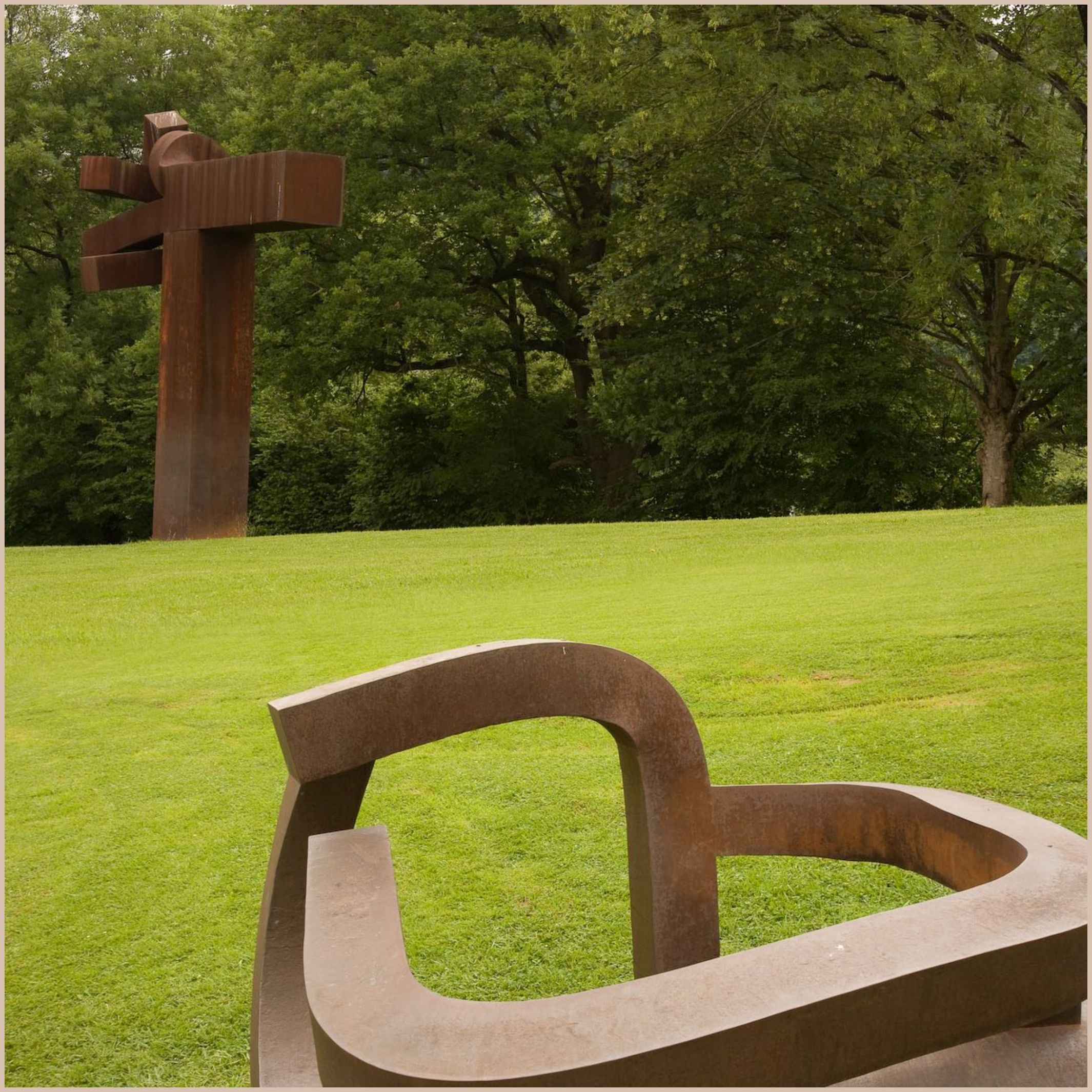
Rays of warm light creep slowly towards you

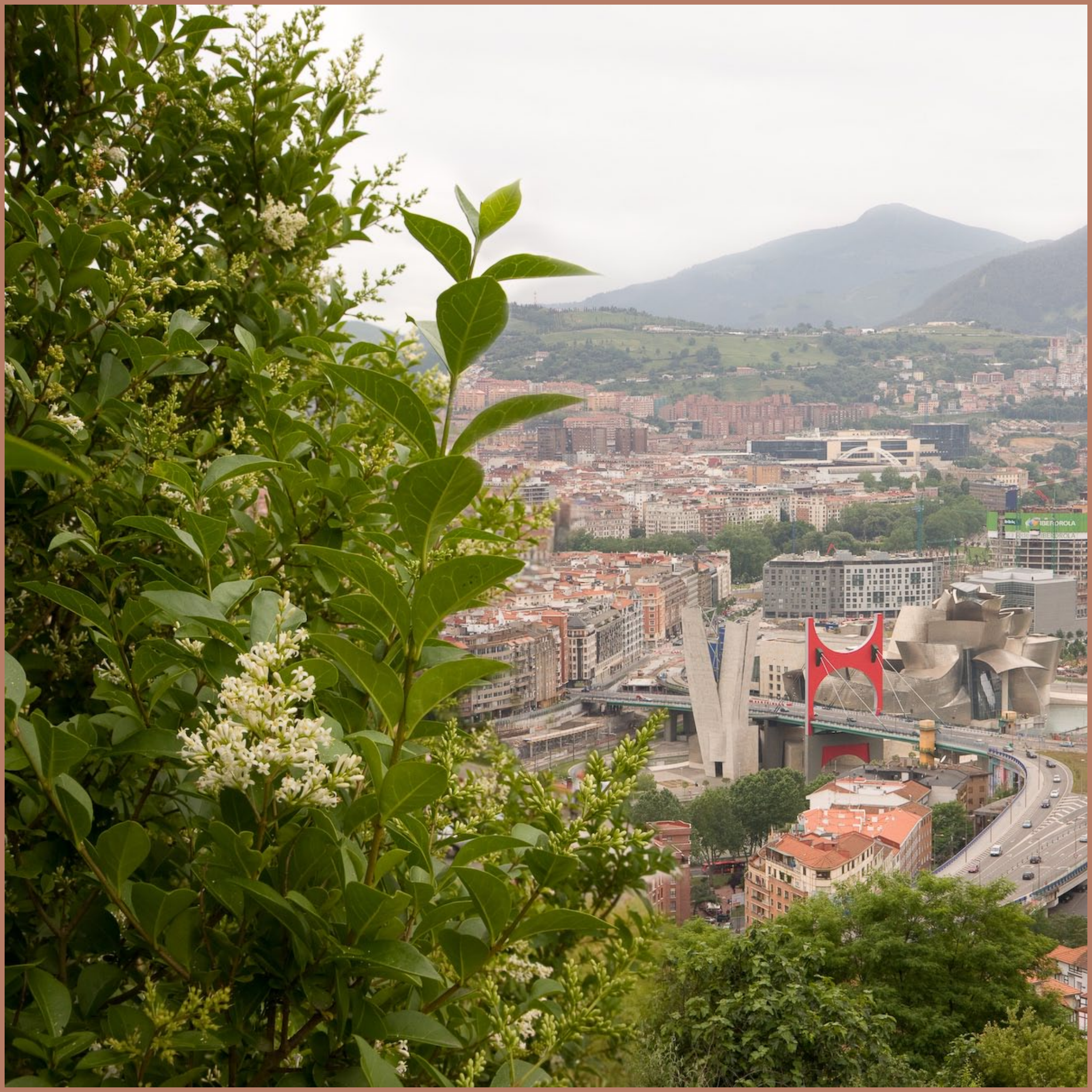
You are the most interesting thing the cows have seen all week

The mist envelops you, and deadens all sound

Rain clings to the tall grass





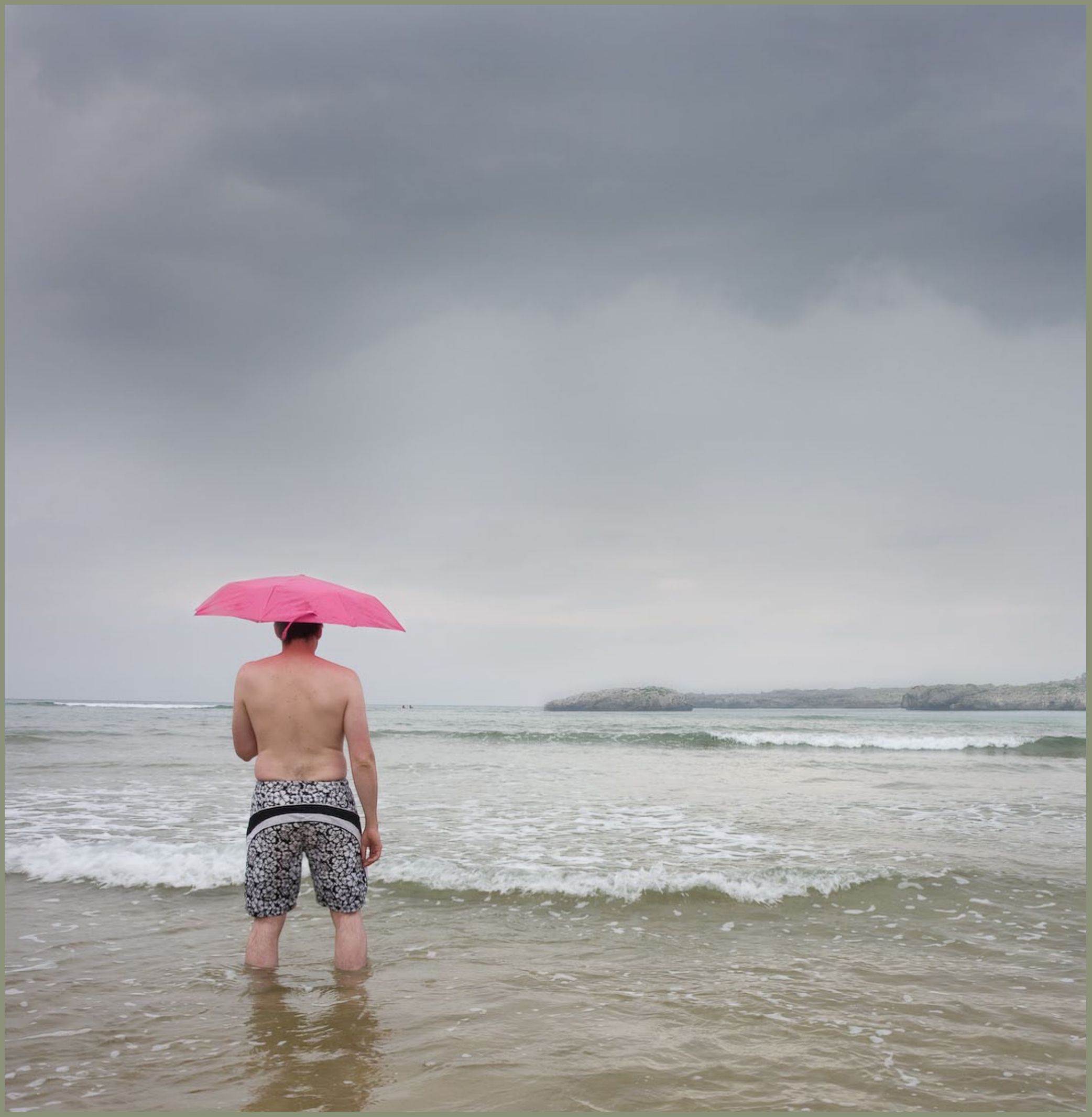

IBERDROLA

the city stops abruptly

You cross a street, and climb up into wooded hills

looking back the way you had come

presented without comment :o)



About the vistagraph technique

Humans are nothing like cameras. While the human eye itself is somewhat like a camera, the eye is just one part of the human ability to perceive the visual world, and cameras suffer from several limitations that do not affect humans. Vistagraphs are an experiment in producing images that reflect the way that humans perceive the world.

As a digital camera focuses light through its lens and captures an image on a silicon sensor, so the eye focuses light through its lens and captures an image on the retina. For a traditional photograph, this moment of capture is the defining point in the production of the final image. All kinds of changes may be made on the computer - RAW adjustment to correct exposure and white balance, cropping to produce a more pleasing composition, perhaps cloning to remove unwanted
elements - but the essential form of the image was fixed when the shutter opened. This is very different to the way that the human visual system works - for us, a single image viewed by the eye at one point in time is just one of a stream of images that we perceive as we look around a scene. In practical terms, this has a number of repercussions:

- **Fixed direction of view**. A photo must be taken from a single position, but a human can walk round a scene appreciating it from several angles. We can stoop down to look closely at a footprint then turn around to take in the sky; a photograph must do one or the other.
- **Single focal length**. The focal length of the lens used for a photo determines the angle of view. A photo can be wide angle to take in more of the scene as a whole, or telephoto to focus on a particular part, but humans can happily go from appreciating a whole scene to focusing on a specific detail.
- **Limited depth of field**. A photograph has a sharp field - an area where objects are in focus. Unless the photographer has taken care to ensure that all the scene is inside the sharp field, some objects will be sharp and others out of focus. Eyes have a sharp field too - the object we are looking directly at is sharp, but other objects are viewed at lower resolution, out of focus, in double vision, or all three. Our brain does a wonderful job at hiding this from us. As we look round a scene, we remember an image of each object when we look directly at it, and put together a mental collage of a scene in which everything is sharp.

- **Limited exposure range**. A photograph has a limited dynamic range - if a scene contains both very light and very dark objects (say both clouds and shadows) then either the bright objects will be overexposed or the dark objects will be underexposed or both. This means that the whole cloud or shadow will be rendered as an area of pure white or black, with no details.

In short, a vistagraph is an image that combines elements of several photographs in an attempt to more accurately represent the feeling of being in the place and time that the photographs were taken. These photographs are taken in different directions, at different focal lengths and exposure settings, but always in the same place and at the same time. This last point is important – the same technique can be used to create fantastical landscapes that bear no relation to a place in the real world, but this is not what I'm aiming for.

When I take the photos, I try to visualise how they will fit into the final vistagraph, and compose them so that the features of each photo will blend into the next without the join between them being obvious.

I make no claim that my method produces generally superior images compared to traditional photography - this is one more method of producing photographic images that, like the other methods, can be used to produce beauties or beasts. My method is not original - I am aware of similar techniques being used by other photographers, cinematographers and painters. What is new, at least to me and hopefully to you, is the combination of technique and philosophy that I call the Vistagraph.

Bernie Sumption
June 2009

P.S. This book contains 15 finished vistagraphs, created from 43 photos. It therefore both is and isn't a successfully completed SoFoBoMo book, depending on how you interpret the 35 photo minimum size.